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# Making and breaking families: a short essay on loss, hope and staying connected

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## ABSTRACT

The focus in this paper is on a specific time point in an adoption matching process. Empirical data from interviews, observations and group analytic processes are juxtaposed to hone in on emotional labor of the social work role. The author discusses the use of a 'many minds' research method to demonstrate how analytic practices can be enriched by collaborative thinking and group processes. This paper pays tribute to Claire Winnicott's work by foregrounding the complexity and generative potential of the social work relationship.

## KEYWORDS

Adoption; matching; psychosocial; embodied practice; collaboration

In this paper I draw on data generated through my psychosocial doctoral study to consider the social work relationship in the context of adoption practices. The intention is to hone in on the emotional labour involved in the exercise of authority and to illuminate unexplored areas of practice. This paper speaks to Claire Winnicott's work in foregrounding the human connections at the heart of social work endeavors. My methodological approach has been informed by the infant observation paradigm but I do not specifically employ psychoanalytic conceptual tools. My aim instead is to employ a psychoanalytic *sensibility* which I understand to be,

... a rigorous practice of thinking that cannot be rushed, that demands time and patience, and that is based on a kind of ethical assumption that it is worth pursuing what one might call a 'truthful' approach to living even if this is difficult and at times painful to do so. (Frosh, 2017, p. 14)

In this paper I juxtapose empirical data from interviews, observations and group analytic processes. To begin I use an extract from an observation to introduce the reader to the subject matter and to 'provide a vivid, visualised, rendering of a data extract that preserves its emotional resonance' (Hollway & Froggett, 2012, para. 1.2). The scene captured in the data extract takes place at the end of a meeting at Debbie's house. Debbie is a single prospective adoptive parent who had been matched for adoption with Lily a 10 month old infant. Claire (Debbie's social worker), myself and Debbie have been sitting in Debbie's living room for an hour or so. Claire and Debbie have been discussing the reasons why the introductions have been stopped. Debbie would like to be considered for another child. Claire has suggested that they will all need some time before any decisions are made,

perhaps a few months. Debbie would like a meeting in a month's time. As the meeting draws to an end Claire asks about Lily's things and this scene unfolds.

Claire says 'What's happening with Lily's room, sorry I mean your room?' Debbie 'Well, to be honest I haven't been in it since the introductions stopped. I've shut the door and I haven't been in again. Claire 'There are things in there that belong to Lily? I guess I'll need her photograph back too'. Debbie 'Err . . . yes. Well of course. Do you want to come and get it?' Claire 'Is that ok, If we go in the bedroom now?' Debbie, 'yes we should. Come on I need to.' Debbie stands up, so does Claire and they walk out the room. I follow them up the stairs and we walk onto the hallway. All the rooms have open doorways except for one. Debbie leads the way, then Claire and then me. She opens the door and we follow her in. We stand in a small box room, with a cot. Lots of toys and girls clothes. There is a photograph of Lily on the wall. Debbie reaches up and takes it down and passes it to Claire. We all look at the photograph of Lily. She has a gummy smile and fluffy hair. Debbie and Claire look at each other and then they hug. I look at my feet. They pull apart and Debbie says 'will you look for a new family for her?' Claire looks at the photo and nods her head, 'Yes and I will find her a family'. Debbie says 'Good.'

(Observation Record 6)

Claire misses a beat here, 'What's happening with Lily's room? Sorry I mean your room'. It's hard to adjust to the bedroom not being Lily's room, but in missing a beat she connects to Debbie's own state of mind. Since the introductions have stopped this bedroom has remained shut off from the rest of her home. The room is still Lily's and must be reclaimed by Debbie as her own. Lily's things must also be reclaimed. Claire will 'need her photograph back' and if that's ok with Debbie she will take it 'now'. Debbie cannot be left in this liminal state. Debbie responds to Claire's request with, 'yes we should. Come on I need to.' Claire and Debbie are working together and the materiality of the photograph is helpful in this process. It is used to stabilize uncertainty and to help Debbie reconcile her experiences. The closed bedroom suggests that Debbie is stuck, she is paralyzed by this state of existence, ' . . . stuck in transition from one circle to the next' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p. 149). Claire's role is to help Debbie escape this paralysis and yes they will need to open that bedroom door.

Claire is decisive about this object and she is decisive about time. The Many Minds group (who have been reflecting on my observation records throughout the field work) express their relief when Claire removes the photograph. This group of 6 includes researchers, social workers, adopters and adoptees. The group reflect that in the discussion leading up to the handover of the photograph, a sense of Lily as a real person had been largely absent. There is also for the group too much uncertainty emitting from Claire. They note her vacillation about when to meet with Debbie. Claire should just decide when the next meeting is. For the group it is only in the moment with the photograph that Lily feels present.

there's something about attending to the feeling, even in a kind of physical way, that brings them back to the child, isn't there? So they go, at that moment Debbie says will you find her a family? So suddenly, the real Lily comes into the room . . . (Marie, Many Minds Group)

It is through the photograph that Claire exerts her authority, that Lily's presence/absence is felt and it is through the photograph that sadness is expressed. Debbie will have no further role in Lily's life but Claire does. Claire re-establishes her commitment and her role as a family finder to Lily as she holds and looks at the photograph. In response to Debbie's question, 'Will you look for a new family for her?' Claire responds physically, she 'nods her head' and answers affirmatively without hesitation 'Yes and I will find her a family'. Debbie's response to Claire's decisiveness and authority is an unequivocal 'Good'.

In my role as an observer I watch as Lily's photograph is passed between Debbie and Claire. In a field note I record that I look at my feet whilst they hug. To look at my feet I have to lower my eyes. 'I felt like I was watching a funeral, like when people stand as the coffin is carried from the hearse, a wake following a stillbirth?' (Field note 8). The family that we all imagined has not come to be. In this moment it feels like something died. The material space and its objects, specifically Lily's photograph are used to enact a ceremony of sorts. This is needed because what has occurred *is* significant and must be marked in some way. There are no established rites of passage for this event, so one has to be created.

## Kind of grieving

But you know, that really reminds me, and . . . I suddenly began to think about an adoption breakdown that I had. The child had been there for a few weeks, the baby, and I'm thinking about, you know . . . And the [inaudible] distraught, how devastating it is for the social worker, for the team. And it's so painful. I mean, as I begin to talk about it, I have flashbacks, you know? And this was years ago and I've had other placements. And that it's almost . . . It's almost too . . . Because the social worker has been part of creating that placement and has been on that journey as well, that it's almost . . . You're so . . . It's so painful to talk about. It's that you're almost not the person, you know? You're sent in to go and explore with her what's happened, but actually, you're also kind of grieving. (Jenny, Many Minds Group)

Jenny (a social worker and an adoptee) recalls her own experience of a family that did not come to be. She says 'as I begin to talk about it, I have flashbacks, you know, and this was years ago'. She expresses surprise that the memory emerges and has such visceral effects after so many years. The word she uses is 'flashbacks'; defined as a part of a story, a play or a film 'that goes back to events in the past' involving, 'a sudden, clear memory of a past event or time, usually one that was bad' (Cambridge Dictionaries, n.d.). A flashback is an intrusive memory. Jenny does not or cannot reveal any of the details of that memory. She tells us something of the event, enough of a narrative to work with, but this is a flashback and is, as such, a short part of a bigger story. When Jenny talks about the 'flashback' she stumbles over her words and there are gaps in her speech, 'and that it's almost . . . It's almost too . . . ' and in the next sentence 'that it's almost . . . you're so . . . It's so painful to talk about'. The difficulty in talking is both in the past and in the present. There is the inference that an experience has been so momentous that she became unrecognizable to herself. 'It's so painful to talk about. It's that you're almost not the person, you know?' (Jenny, Many Minds Group). Is Jenny talking in the first person? Does she mean that any practitioner in this situation is 'almost not the person'? Is this about me/she or us? The confusion is in the conflating of experience, but perhaps the distinction is not important in the context of a 'flashback', when affect travels in this way, when experiences are similar and identifications so strong. For Jenny being close to an abortive/abandoned and nearly adoptive family means being exposed to grief. Although she is unable to fully claim the experience for herself or for Claire, 'you're also kind of grieving'. Here, 'kind of' works to downplay the experience, this vulnerability can only be touched on.

Jenny suggests that as a practitioner, 'you're sent in to go and explore with her what's happened'. The practitioner is 'sent in', but what is she sent *into* and what is she sent in *to do* exactly? According to Jenny the practitioner must 'explore with her what's happened'. For Claire in Observation 6 this involves collecting up transformative objects (that marked the beginning of a family). It necessitates physical work (carrying these objects and hugging Debbie). It involves cognitive work, Claire must be investigative and analytical (because she must explore and make sense of events in order to inform future planning). She must be curious, sensitive and empathic, because she must do this work *with* Debbie, to 'explore with her', and not to her. To explore an upsetting situation with someone involves emotional labor and relational skills. All in all it's a lot of work. Claire's arrival at Debbie's house suggests it might be too much work. She is 20 minutes late and tells us she drove past the house; actually she drove too far west. The Many Minds group reflect on what Claire's late arrival might mean.

David: And I told myself, she might have wanted to have kept going, into the west . . .

Marie: Yes.

David: Just not have to think about anything . . .

Claire has been 'sent in' through her role and her duties as Debbie's social worker to undertake the work she is required to do. She is an authority figure charged with decision making. She drives past the house, a house she has visited countless times over the course of a year or more. As David suggests 'she might have wanted to have kept going'. Claire's (seeming) reluctance to begin the work might also be to do with another job she is required to do at this visit. She must use her authority, to help end a family because 'To go west' also means to; 'be killed or lost: Meet with disaster' (Oxford Dictionaries, [n.d.](#)). Claire now has an important role in killing this fantasy family; the family she had been working so hard to realize. Claire is not allowed to keep going west. She is being 'sent in'. She turns the car around and comes back. It takes her until the end of the meeting, but she does her job. She takes Lily's photograph and this family is no more.

## Protective practice

Later I interview Claire and I comment on the demands of her role. She has fitted our interview in between appointments and is leaving immediately afterwards to visit adopters who are being matched with a child. Claire, in response, reflects on her strategies for managing the emotional demands of the job.

Claire: . . .but I suppose you'd you know you would have to protect yourself against that everywhere, most people, everyone. . . it would be a normal sort of response wouldn't? To protect yourself in some way against of um being you know devastating or. . .

Me: You mean Debbie would or you would or..?

Claire: I mean I am thinking for everyone, I think adopters you know but also workers. . . yeah so you are I don't know you are constantly going a bit closer and then sort of a bit back and a bit closer, you know, because it would be no good if you were in that with them. . .

There is a conflating of experience 'you would have to protect yourself against that everywhere, most people, everyone . . . ' Claire recognizes the risks and the potential for devastation for herself, and for others, 'I am thinking for everyone'. There is a collective need for defenses, 'you have to protect yourself'. Jenny's 'almost' and 'kind of' grieving are given further clarity here. To grieve or to fully acknowledge grief would mean to be 'in that with them', to lose sight of who you are. To do that, results in the kind of experiences relayed by other adopters in my study, 'We had a letter from the social worker afterwards . . . telling me the stress involved had hospitalised her' (Gail). This is tricky then, this work, which involves 'going a bit closer and then sort of back a bit and a bit closer'. Gail's social worker got too close.

In Observation 6 Claire is seen to be defended, 'She's so like, removed, isn't she?' (Marie, Many Minds Group). Why is she not engaging with feelings here? The dialogue between Claire and Debbie is deemed to be stilted and avoidant. Jenny is bored by some of the discussion. The group notes a number of key moments where opportunities for delving deeper are not taken, sometimes by Claire and sometimes by Debbie. 'There's a lot of dancing around' (Marie).

It becomes very procedural, doesn't it? And then Claire almost defends . . . Right at the beginning there's a sense that Claire defends against any emotional talk by, can you tell me about the decision making process? So she already . . . There's a real sense of cutting out, yes, the question of how are you feeling, by you know, you know, how can you make sure nobody talks about feelings. (Jenny, Many Minds Group)

Following the group's lead I follow Claire's lead through the written record. Claire does, as the group suggests, guard against explorations of emotion. She begins, 'Can you tell me about your decision-making process?', and Debbie follows her lead. Debbie then talks about decision making and processes. She says at one point 'I want to go forward with another placement' but Claire corrects her, 'You mean with becoming a Mum?' Claire is supporting and protecting Debbie in this scene but something happens in this moment. Debbie's use of the word 'placement' seems to be provocative. Through this provocation Claire's role as a social worker, charged with pursuing permanence, is mobilized. If her relationship with Debbie is to continue she must be confident that Debbie can and wants to be a maternal figure to a child. She can allow Debbie to use language that distances herself from the loss of Lily but she has to respond to, 'I want to go forward with another placement'. Claire needs clarification. She challenges Debbie, 'Who are you?' A placement provider or a mother?

I mean, that's . . . You don't get a sense that this is worrying about children, a child, really it kind of feels as though Lily's evaporated. So the kind of loss of . . . The ending of her relationship and whatever kind of feelings, however long it may have lasted, it feels that it's just not a part of . . . So you've not, you've not kind of started this kind of . . . The power of trying to make a connection with a vulnerable child . . . That's really what this . . . None of this really allows that that's fundamentally this is what has been brought to an end. (David, Many Minds Group)

The group reflecting on both Claire and Debbie's language and the interplay between them are disturbed. Where is Lily in this? Why is Debbie not expressing her feelings? What are her feelings? Where is the grief? Does Debbie really want to be a Mum? (the group are also provoked by the word 'placement'), 'it's almost like she's removed herself

from the reality of what she's embarking on, and it's become this very cognitive, rational thing' (Marie, Many Minds Group).

Claire, in her interview, describes a previous meeting (recorded in Observation 5) as 'excruciating'. At this meeting Debbie had been questioned by Lily's social worker about a dissociative episode which resulted in Lily being taken from Debbie's arms. Debbie had physically and psychologically collapsed and her capacity to take care of Lily had become a source of real concern. Perhaps then Claire, in this subsequent meeting provides Debbie with the means in which to protect herself – a language and concepts devoid of feeling. With the gift of this language is Claire 'thinking for everyone' and protecting the three of us from another 'excruciating' encounter?

Once humans get close to each other, their internal worlds are in a dynamic relation to each other. All the earlier experiences of each member of any significant intimate relationship (dyad, triad, family, group, etc.) contribute to the landscape of the new relationship. Events in the present can throw into prominence troubling aspects of the past, both providing a chance for a new way forward but also often engendering confusion and distress (Rustin, 1999, p. 81)

Rustin is exploring the dynamics of adoptive family life years after a matching process but she could also be describing the landscape of Claire's work place. When Jenny talks about being 'sent in' this is where practitioners are expected to go. In Observation 6 the landscape is not safe. There are too many humans too 'close to each other'. The dynamic relation of internal worlds, the multiple 'troubling aspects of the past' and particularly the loss of 'a new way forward' (envisioned by the joining of Lily and Debbie) creates a precarious working environment. Claire is required as part of her role to try and make sense of events in order to plan for the future. In Observation 6 everything is up in the air and the threads are too entangled. It is just not possible to make sense of everything in the moment. There will be other moments and that is the precious affordance provided by a relationship that is forged over time.

## Summary

In this paper I have not sought to explicate my doctoral study or 'the case' and this is not a case review. Questions as to why events unfold as they do are left unanswered. Instead I have explored a specific time point in a unique working relationship to highlight 'the intrinsically inter-subjective nature of social work encounters' (Ruch, 2016, p. 28). I wanted also to illustrate the demands of the role. Cars have to be turned round and bedroom doors have to be opened because, 'If the pain in the situation is not recognised and shared, it cannot be experienced and worked through' (Winnicott & Kanter, 1997, p. 117).

My hope is that this short paper pays tribute to Claire Winnicott's work by foregrounding the complexity and generative potential of the social work relationship. In this piece I have also sought to illuminate the ways in which analytic practices are enriched by collaborative thinking, because always and forever 'collectively we are more than the sum of our parts' (Thomson, 2010, p. 9).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Dr Louise Sims* (MSW, MSC, PhD) is a registered social worker. She works at the University of Sussex as a Doctoral Tutor and Research Associate. Her PhD, *What Happens in the making of an adoptive family? Rethinking matching in adoptions from care* was completed in 2018 and is available at the University of Sussex. The study was undertaken in association with CoramBAAF and this essay was based on her research.

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